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When he was putting together his first presidential budget proposal this spring, Barack Obama decided to make an aircraft engine that costs as much as $1 million per foot a symbol of the sort of Pentagon waste he says he’s determined to root out.

The new president declared his intention to abandon the Defense Department’s long-running plans for developing a second, alternative jet engine for the military’s next-generation F-35 fighter and to use the savings to make more and less-expensive copies of the plane. “We’re going to save money by eliminating unnecessary defense programs that do nothing to keep us safe,” Obama said. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates also weighed in, warning that he would recommend that Obama veto any congressional attempt to keep the second engine program alive.

But these days, it looks increasingly likely Obama won’t get his way on one of his first high-profile efforts to shape Pentagon procurement — in no small measure because advocates of the two-engines-are-better-than-one approach have some solid evidence on their side.

Last week Congress cleared a defense authorization bill that would keep the alternative F-35 engine program alive, and a veto is highly unlikely because the same measure also would extend protection to gay people under the federal hate crimes law, a longstanding objective of the Democratic Party. And if $560 million for the backup engine is provided under separate appropriations legislation, which seems possible, Obama will be hard-pressed to sign that measure because of his other priorities that it’s likely to finance.

Proponents of two engines argue that such competition and redundancy will prove cost-effective in the long run. And the lawmakers and military experts in this camp can point to a series of Government Accountability Office and Pentagon studies concluding that similar second-engine programs for the F-15 and F-16 warplanes improved performance and production costs for those fighters, which have been Air Force workhorses since the 1970s.

“They would rather eat their corn than plant it,” is the way a senior congressional aide, who favors a competition for an alternative engine but wished to remain anonymous, described the administration’s approach to the F-35, also called the Joint Strike Fighter.

The president and others on his side say one engine is adequate and, besides that, all that’s affordable now. But on this score they have been put in the unenviable position of arguing against the very manufacturer of the principal engine, United Technologies Corp.’s Pratt & Whitney. In a report quietly submitted to the congressional Armed Services committees this summer, the company conceded that technical challenges have pushed the cost of the machinery up almost 50 percent, to about $18 million an engine.

The debate is no small matter, for both fiscal policy and military readiness. A modern jet warplane is essentially a collection of weaponry, wings and a cockpit strapped to an engine. If the engine doesn’t function properly, there is no warplane to fly.

Backbone of the Force

The essential arguments for a backup F-35 engine, which is already in development by General Electric Co. and Britain’s Rolls-Royce, is

that the competition will improve quality and control costs now, and in the future a backup could prove invaluable if the first engine develops a systemic flaw that could otherwise ground the backbone of the fighter attack force; most such planes are supposed to be F-35s within the next 10 years.

“You have to have an insurance policy if something goes wrong with that motor,” said retired Lt. Gen. Michael A. Hough of the Marine Corps, a former director of the Joint Strike Fighter program at the Pentagon.

The military plans to buy roughly 2,500 copies of the F-35 over the 30-year life of the program. Only the first 11 test aircraft have been delivered so far. In slightly different forms, the plane is going to be the successor to the collection of aging tactical fighters now flown by the Air Force, Navy and Marines.

Although President George W. Bush also opposed the two-engine approach, Congress has continued to provide unrequested funding for the backup since fiscal 2007. The $560 million in the House version of the Defense appropriations bill — which the Senate seems ready to accept during conference negotiations — is about half what would be needed to complete development by 2013, according to the Congressional Research Service. Estimates for the total costs of the engine’s development range from $4 billion to roughly $8 billion, according to three studies conducted on the alternative engine.

Cost Reduction Promised

But independent Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, where the Pratt & Whitney engine is built, says such spending is a waste of money. “The risks associated with a single engine provider are manageable,” said Lieberman, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee.

Advocates for the second engine say Lieberman’s view is mistaken and parochial. Last month the Pratt & Whitney engine, they note, suffered its sixth failure during a test, which revealed problems with the engine’s fan blades for the third time. And in July the company told Congress the third order for its engines was costing about $18 million apiece, a far cry from the Air Force’s original $12.5 million projection. Costs for the two previous orders were also high, and so the Pentagon has ordered a team of top Air Force and Navy acquisition officials to identify the reasons and propose solutions by Nov. 20.

Pratt & Whitney spokeswoman Erin Dick declined to comment on the past cost overruns, but she said the company has promised a “double-digit percentage reduction in cost” for the fourth order.

Maj. Gen. David R. Heinz of the Marines, the manager of the program, has declined to discuss the Joint Strike Fighter since June, when he told reporters more debate was needed on whether depending on one engine is too risky.

Earlier this month, Gates sent a letter to John P. Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat who chairs the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, reiterating Obama’s view that further funding for the alternative engine would interfere with the overall F-35 program. “If the final bill presented to the president would seriously disrupt” the Joint Strike Fighter program, “I would recommend that he veto the bill,” Gates wrote.

Yet even with such threats hanging over their heads, Murtha and other senior House members appear confident that both defense bills supporting the alternative engine will become law by the end of the year.

For starters, Murtha notes, both the defense authorization conference report and the House version of the Defense spending bill largely meet Obama’s requests for the F-35. And the addition of funding for the alternative engine, Murtha insists, would not “disrupt” the F-35 program — the standard laid out by the Defense secretary for recommending a veto. Murtha predicts alternative-engine funding will be included in the final Defense spending conference report. And last week Daniel K. Inouye, a Hawaii Democrat who is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and its Defense panel, signaled that he would not fight that outcome.

Another Hawaii Democrat who’s generally been the president’s ally, Neil Abercrombie, a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, argues that the president is not being well advised on the F-35. “Obama is taking a huge chance that somehow this program will just right itself,” Abercrombie said. “The defense bill was handled in a sober, serious and straightforward way. It has overwhelming support of both bodies. This is an important bill” that the president should sign and then “move on,” Abercrombie added.

Lawmakers including Murtha and Abercrombie are pointing to the recent Pratt & Whitney engine failures as justification of a second-engine program. And they’re receiving help from Hough, the former Joint Strike Fighter program manager, who says Pratt & Whitney’s problems with the engine underscore the dangers to national security if the U.S. military were to become too dependent on one engine.

If the engine experienced design, fan blade or other systemic troubles, the entire F-35 fleet could be ordered out of the skies for weeks. Although such groundings are rare, they have occurred.

According to the Congressional Research Service, the Marine Corps grounded more than 100 AV-8B Harrier jets in 2000 because of engine problems. And the Air Force has twice grounded warplane fleets due to engine issues since 1990.

Jockeying for Influence

As lawmakers and military experts defend the alternative engine, the two principal American companies involved in the debate — Pratt & Whitney and General Electric — are waging their own battle for influence on Capitol Hill.

Rick Kennedy, a spokesman for GE, which supplies the engines for 70 percent of the nation’s tactical fighter jets, says his company and Rolls-Royce have offered the Pentagon a fixed-price contract for the backup engine, which essentially means GE would be responsible for anything spent beyond the contract value. But according to a senior congressional aide who favors the single-engine approach, Pratt & Whitney has also offered a fee structure for the fourth lot of engines that “will protect the government against possible cost overruns.”

A portion of the $19 million that GE has devoted to lobbying lawmakers this year has gone to dispel what Kennedy calls “misinformation.” Pratt & Whitney’s parent, United Technologies, has devoted some of its $4.4

million in lobbying expenses to the F-35 engine.

Meanwhile, the controversy over the alternative engine also has foreign policy dimensions.

Britain, along with seven other international partners that are slated to buy the F-35 for their own air forces, signed agreements with the United States in 2006 and 2007 that require the inclusion of the alternative engine in the F-35 program.

A spokesman for the British Embassy in Washington declined to comment on defense bills that are about to be voted upon in Congress or the possibility of a presidential veto. But the official, Neil O’Reilly, like others on the second-engine side of the debate, had an official opinion from the other side of the pond. “The United Kingdom believes that a competitive engine strategy will reduce costs and risk through the life of the” Joint Strike Fighter program, O’Reilly said.